

AUTHORITY IN OPINION.

REFERRING to Stephen Pearl Andrews's "Universology," or newly-discovered science of the universe, the *London Saturday Review* has the following remarks on the state of mind in this country, which favors the multiplication of all kinds of mental extravagances:

Americans sometimes boast—and with occasional truth—that they discover English writers of genius before they have gained honor in their native country. They do it, however, at the price of accepting also a good deal of rubbish. Tuppens pass current there as well as Tennysons, and sham philosophy, if it only uses big enough words, and asserts itself with sufficient audacity, secures a foothold as well as the genuine article. The most high-flying transcendentalism will find sympathetic souls in Boston when it can excite nothing but a sneer in London.

There is nothing surprising, and certainly nothing discreditable, about this. It is an illustration of the real meaning of the frequently-misused term, that America is a young country. The analogy between a nation and an individual is apt to mislead; but in some points there is a genuine resemblance. Most clever young men go through a certain phase, as naturally as babies take the measles. If poetically inclined, they are cured by a favorable eruption of bad verses; and if given to speculation, they frequently invent what Mr. Andrews so happily calls universology. An intellect of average strength and cultivation discovers, generally about the age of twenty-three, that it has not quite solved the 'riddle of the painful earth;' that there are flaws in the scheme which once seemed so perfectly satisfactory; and that the same ideas which looked so novel and startling, had previously occurred to more than one philosopher since men began to speculate.

Occasionally men of ability are so peculiarly constituted that they carry on this temper of mind into maturer life; and they then develop into the creators of the various ephemeral Utopias which amuse or sadden us for a time. Great social convulsions such as the French Revolution naturally encourage this temper, and throw up St. Simons, and Fourier, and Comtes, because they seem to open wide possibilities for mankind; and America, in a certain sense, is in a permanent state of revolution. The order of things changes so rapidly, and the whole mind of the people is so constantly set upon the development of its vast resources, that it is no wonder that enthusiastic people suffer from a kind of spiritual intoxication. Every thing seems to be possible; and it is the most natural thing in the world to propose a com-

pletely new system which shall introduce an impromptu renovation of society from top to bottom. There is no deeply-rooted respect for old traditions to hamper the boldest schemer; he has, as it were, a blank sheet of paper on which to draw his diagrams just as pleases him best; and he naturally gives full play to the indomitable hopefulness which is the most attractive feature of new societies. In a less satisfactory sense, he falls into the credulity which in an old country is eradicated before a man grows up to years of discretion. There is as yet no thoroughly cultivated class in America which can speak with authority in matters of speculation. One man is as good as another—not merely in regard of his political rights, but because he has attained pretty nearly the same level of cultivation. No ferocious critic sits in the seat of judgment ready to pass sentence on any impostor who claims to be a leader of thought. Doubtless such a class is being slowly developed; but, meanwhile, questions, which ought to be decided by competent judges, are determined by universal suffrage or popular acclamation.

We are astonished at the success with which the impositions of spiritualism thrive on Transatlantic soil. No story of eccentric tables and mysterious spirit-writings seems to be too gross to find favor. New dodges are found out as soon as the old ones disappear; and a little sleight-of-hand would enable any unscrupulous person to make a very comfortable living out of our kinsmen. If we ask why similar delusions are not so prevalent in England, we can hardly flatter ourselves that it is because we have in general attained a higher intellectual level. Everybody has known persons of apparent sanity, and even sense, who believed in the whole nonsense of spiritualism. And it was easy to see, in the discussions produced by the case of Home, that most people, whatever their judgment might be, were incapable of forming it on scientific grounds. They did not in the least appreciate the requirements of sound reasoning, or know what tests should be satisfied before the advocates of such an amazing doctrine would acquire a right to be heard.

The peasantry, we are often reminded, are still at that stage of education in which a belief in witchcraft is possible, though it need not always exist; and it is probable that the majority of the upper classes are equally capable of believing in spiritualism; that is to say, a good round assertion of its truth would find them incapable of testing it critically. Now, American believers are, very many of them, fully as intelligent as the body of English skeptics. What is more singular, they have generally a rather higher respect for the claims of science, and are apt to clothe their intolerable nonsense in a singular scientific jargon. They generally argue with naïve ignorance of the subject. Thus they fancy that a belief in discoveries about electricity (the favorite name for every thing that people don't understand) ought to make a belief in spiritualism easier, and run over all the fine words which will doubtless find a place in the science of Universology. The true difference between the cases is, not that the general run of Englishmen are more intelligent or more sensitive to the claims of science, but simply that they have a court of appeal for which they have a good deal more respect. They have a dim belief that a spiritualist must be a fool, because Faraday or Dr. Tyndall assures them that spiritualism is folly. In America, where there is a general presumption in favor of any thing that is new, there is also no one to exercise any supervision over the purveyors of novelty. They are, in short, in the same intellectual position as the youth who has read some popular books of science, but has not learned by experience the labor which goes to form a scientific authority.